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Nations under God: How Church–State Relations Shape Christian Responses to Right-Wing Populism in Germany and the United States

Tobias Cremer

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2JD, UK; tc459@cam.ac.uk or tobias.cremer@pmb.ox.ac.uk; Tel.: +44-7948-044319

Abstract: Right-wing populists across many western countries have markedly intensified their references to Christianity in recent years. However, Christian communities' reactions to such developments often vary significantly, ranging from disproportionate support in some countries to outspoken opposition in others. This paper explores the role of structural factors, and in particular of Church–State relations, in accounting for some of these differences. Specifically, this article explores how Church–State relations in Germany and the United States have produced different incentives and opportunity structures for faith leaders when facing right-wing populism. Based on quantitative studies, survey data, and 31 in-depth elite interviews, this research suggests that whereas Germany's system of "benevolent neutrality" encourages highly centralised churches whose leaders perceive themselves as integral part and defenders of the current system, and are therefore both *willing* and *able* to create social taboos against right-wing populism, America's "Wall of separation" favours a de-centralised religious marketplace, in which church leaders are more prone to agree with populists' anti-elitist rhetoric, and face higher costs and barriers against publicly condemning right-wing populism. Taking such structural factors into greater account when analysing Christian responses to right-wing populism is central to understanding current and future dynamics between politics and religion in western democracies.



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1. Introduction

This paper compares the cases of Germany and the United States to investigate how a country's institutional settlement of Church–State relations can shape Christian communities' responses to right-wing populist politics. Germany and the United States are representative of many western countries in having recently experienced a surge of right-wing populist movements, which prominently display Christian symbols and use Christian language (Thielmann 2017; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Elcott et al. 2021). Pro-Trump rioters parading oversized crosses and Jesus flags during the storming of the Capitol in January 2021, or Germany's far-Alternative for Germany (AfD) stylising itself as the defender of Germany's "Judeo-Christian heritage" are two of the most recent examples of this development (Deutschlandfunk 2018; Cremer 2021b; Green 2021). However, while right-wing populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic appear determined to use Christian symbols and language in order to appeal to voters' concerns about national and cultural identity (Marzouki et al. 2016; Brubaker 2017; Haynes 2020), the reactions of German and American Christian communities to such references are strikingly different. In the US, White Christians supported Donald Trump's right-wing populist campaign at record-levels in the 2016 and 2020 elections and many American Christian leaders appeared at least tacitly supportive of the Trump administration (P. S. Gorski 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). By contrast, German Protestants and Catholics were significantly less likely to vote for the AfD

than irreligious voters, and Germany's churches have emerged as some of the far right's most outspoken public critics (Cremer 2018; Siegers and Jedinger 2020; Elcott et al. 2021). This paper seeks to better understand the dynamics behind such differing responses in German and American Christian communities to the populist right, with a particular focus on the role of Church–State relations.

In the academic literature, different responses by Christian communities have often led to opposing interpretations of the relationship between religion and right-wing populism in general. Some interpret right-wing populism as a movement largely fuelled by White Christian Nationalism (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). By contrast, others point to right-wing populists' poor performance among Christian voters in some countries to speak of a "religious vaccination effect", "religion gap" or "religious immunity" to right-wing populism (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Immerzeel et al. 2013; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2020). While there has been little comparative analysis of the dynamics behind such variations, some scholars have recently made suggestions as to why Christian communities in some countries may appear to disproportionately support right-wing populist politics while their coreligionists in comparable countries disproportionately reject them. In the US, for instance, there is a growing literature pointing to the historical prevalence and theological roots of White Christian Nationalism and populism in American Christianity, which can be traced back at least back to the great awakenings of the 18th and 19th century, and which may have rendered American Evangelicals more receptive to Trumpism (Stein 1992; Fea 2018; P. Gorski 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Meanwhile, in Europe scholars have explored the strategies and rhetoric of right-wing populists themselves, finding that under the surface of Christian symbolism and identitarian references, many western European right-wing populists, actually defend increasingly secularist policies and merely "hijack" Christian symbols as a cultural identity marker against Islam, which may lead European Christian communities to oppose them (Marzouki et al. 2016; Brubaker 2017; Haynes 2019; Ozzano 2021). Finally, some authors have stressed the importance of political party affiliation, which may make many European Christian communities unavailable towards the populist right as they are already bound to Christian democratic or conservative competitor parties, whereas in the US traditional party allegiance to the GOP might have pushed American Christians towards Donald Trump (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2020).

Each of these avenues of research contributes critical insights. However, one key variable in understanding Christian responses to right-wing populism has so far often been left out of the debate: the institutional settlement of Church–State relations. This is remarkable as research has shown that Church–State relations can critically influence a country's religious landscape, and also how religious communities engage in the political arena (Dolezal et al. 2010; Minkenberg 2018; Mantilla 2019; Ozzano 2021). This paper seeks to address this lacuna in the literature, by exploring how differences in Church–State relations in Germany and the US have contributed to diverging responses of Christian communities to the populist right. Specifically, this paper examines how structural pressures and incentives created by the settlement of Church–State relations have encouraged church leaders to either publicly challenge right-wing populist politics (as in Germany) or silently condone it (as in the US), and how these dynamics may, in turn, have shaped the attitudes of Christian voters in the pews.

The selection of Germany and the US as case studies has been inspired by a "most similar and different outcome" approach (Rihoux and Ragin 2009). Both countries are Protestant-dominated but multi-denominational western democracies that have recently experienced the rise of powerful right-wing populist movements and a resurgence of religious references by these movements (Pollack and Rosta 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Moreover, research has shown that under the surface of religious references, right-wing populist movements in both countries appear often more driven by secular right-wing identity politics and a civilisational rejection of Islam than by traditional religious or moral

concerns (Brubaker 2017; Thielmann 2017; Haynes 2019; Cremer 2021a; Elcott et al. 2021; Ozzano 2021). However, American and German Christian communities significantly diverge in their reaction to these developments with overwhelming support of Christian voters for Donald Trump in the US (Whitehead and Perry 2020), and a comparative religious immunity to right-wing populism among German Christians (Siegers and Jedinger 2020)¹. Empirical support for this research is drawn from a range of sources including quantitative studies, survey data, and the qualitative analysis of 31 elite interviews with senior church officials and other faith and civil society leaders conducted in Germany and the US between 2018 and 2021.²

Overall, this article posits that variations in Christian responses to right-wing populism between Germany and the US have been influenced by Church–State relations, insofar as these settlements incentivise Christian leaders to behave differently vis-à-vis the populist right, which, in turn, influences the behaviour of Christians in the pews. Specifically, Germany’s church-friendly system of “benevolent neutrality” and formalised civil religion, appears not only to have encouraged church leaders to speak out against right-wing populist rhetoric, but also strengthened deference to Christian leaders’ authority in society by endowing them with a privileged institutional, social and religious status. As a result, German faith leaders seem to have been able to create powerful social taboos around the AfD within their congregations. By contrast, America’s informal civil religious tradition and unregulated religious marketplace, combined with recent trends towards religious de-institutionalisation and secularisation seem to have facilitated the rise of a siege mentality in Evangelical circles whilst significantly undermining the status, independence and moral authority of America’s religious establishment. This not only had negative impacts on their willingness to speak out against Trump, but also on their ability to be heard within their flock even if they did.

The paper is structured in five sections. After contextualising the research question in this instruction (Section 1), Section 2 briefly reviews the historical background of Church–State relations in both countries and discusses the constitutional arrangements set out by the German *Grundgesetz* and the US Constitution’s First Amendment. Section 3 examines three key dynamics in which these arrangements have shaped Christian leaders’ attitudes and strategies towards the populist right in different ways. Specifically, it looks at how Church–State relations have influenced faith leaders’ self-perceptions within the system (Section 3.1), their avenues of access to the policymaking process (Section 3.2), and church-internal power-dynamics (Section 3.3). After having discussed how Church–State relations influence faith leaders’ *willingness to speak out* against the populist right through these three mechanisms, Section 4 examines how Church–State relations impact faith leaders’ *ability to be heard* and to shape Christian voting behaviour. The conclusion (Section 5) places these findings in the context of the academic literature and discusses their implication for current debates about the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary western societies.

2. Background: Church–State Relations and Civil Religion in Germany and the US

Within just a few months, the legislatures of both Germany and the US were threatened by an angry mob of far-right rioters carrying Christian symbols. On 6 January 2021, thousands of pro-Trump protesters stormed the US Capitol, ravaging congressional offices, threatening lawmakers, and sowing death and destruction in the inner sanctum

¹ Scholars like Siegers and Jedinger (2020) argue that this “religious immunity” also accounts for part of the AfD’s significantly stronger performance in East Germany which is significantly more secular than the West. It is also worth noting that the AfD underperforms among similar measure among Christians across both West and East German states (ibid).

² The elite interviews for this study were conducted between 2018 and 2021 in a semi-structured fashion. All interviewees were fully informed about the research project and provided written and/or verbal consent to the use of the material. In addition, each interviewee was sent a list of direct quotes to be used, providing them with an opportunity to review, retract or anonymize material and provide feedback prior to publication. Ethical Approval for this procedure was sought from and has been granted by the Cambridge University Department of Politics and International Studies. To ensure the anonymity of interviewees for this article each interview has been randomly allocated a number (P1–P31) and will only be referenced as such in the text. For a list of all interviewees cited in this article see Appendix A.

of American democracy while displaying “Jesus saves” flags and staging sit-in prayers (Cremer 2021b; Green 2021). Christian symbols like oversized crosses were also present a few months earlier, in August 2020 in Berlin, when several hundred German far-right demonstrators attempted to break through police barriers and climbed the entrance steps to the *Bundestag*, Germany’s federal parliament (Bohr 2020). The presence of Christian symbols in both instances has led some observers to conclude that the protests were driven by a White Christian Nationalism that was irreconcilable with liberal and increasingly secular western societies (Althoff 2018; Edsall 2021; Green 2021).

Yet, such accounts often overlook that these instances of anti-democratic violence combined with Christian symbolism were soon contrasted by very different expressions of the relationship between religion and politics in both countries. For instance, only two weeks after the Capitol riots, US President Joe Biden was sworn into office on the steps of the Capitol on his family Bible in an inauguration ceremony full of religious symbolism (Cremer 2021b). In his inauguration speech, Biden directly appealed to religious values, quoted Catholic saints and went on to lead the nation in prayer (Graham 2021). Meanwhile in Germany, the official national celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of German unity were held on 3 October 2020 in the form of an ecumenical Christian service in Potsdam’s famous *Garnisonskirche*, with the German president, chancellor and cabinet all in attendance (Bundesregierung 2020).

These latter manifestations of religious symbolism and rhetoric in political contexts are only two recent expressions of the abiding importance of Germany’s and America’s civil religious tradition even in times of religious pluralism and secularisation.³ According to Gorski, civil religion usually has two key functions in a society. On the one hand, it serves as an integrative force to bridge political, cultural, ethnic, geographical and linguistic divides and to provide a shared source of cohesion and identity (Bellah 1967; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; P. Gorski 2019, p. 34). On the other hand, civil religion has often served as a source of “prophetic criticism”, which holds a nation accountable to its own higher principles and ideals (P. Gorski 2019, p. 34). As we will explore in the following paragraphs, both the Germany *Grundgesetz* and the US constitution established systems of Church–State relations aimed at strengthening civil religion. However, while similar in their positive appreciation of Christianity’s place in society and their declared aim to strengthen religious freedom, the US First Amendment and Germany’s system of “benevolent neutrality”, have set very different incentive and pressure structures for Christian communities to organize themselves, interpret their relationship with the state and—critically for this research—respond differently to anti-system populist insurgencies. To understand these dynamics, this section examines both systems’ historical genesis, constitutional frameworks and the incentive and pressure structures they produce.

2.1. The German *Grundgesetz* and the System of Benevolent Neutrality

Contemporary Church–State relations in Germany are largely shaped by the negative experience of WWII and the wish to formally incorporate Christian values and institutions as a civilisational anti-dote to totalitarianism (Dipper 2019). Such an interpretation of Christianity as a bulwark for liberal democracy was no matter of course, as prior to 1945 neither Germany’s Protestant nor Catholic Churches had been particularly enthusiastic supporters of democracy. German Protestantism, for instance, had been closely associated with the Prussian throne, and even though most of the Protestant establishment would have preferred a *Kaiser* over a *Führer*, a majority of them still opted for the NSDAP over the Catholic *Zentrum* party or “Godless Socialism” in 1933 (Strohm 2011; Scheliha 2019). Catholics, in whom the decades-long persecution as “enemies of the Reich” under Bismarck and the *Kaiser* had instilled a certain suspicion towards the German state, voted for Hitler at much lower rates, and Catholic authorities remained significantly more critical of the Nazis’

³ Civil religion can be understood as the religiously inspired (but often non-sectarian) creed of common values that undergirds a nation’s politics and identity (Bellah 1967; P. Gorski 2019).

racially defined “Positive Christianity” than their Protestant counterparts (Wehler 1994; Gruber 2006). However, pre-1945, political Catholicism, too, was as Kalyvas and van Kersbergen put it “largely antiliberal (. . .) (and) challenged the ascendancy of liberalism in Europe from a ‘fundamentalist’ and theocratic perspective” (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen 2010, p. 185).

Yet, in 1945, as most other pillars of German civil society had either been eradicated by or fully assimilated into the Nazi state, Germany’s churches still stood out as those institutions that were perhaps least tainted by Nazism (Ringshausen 2014). This was largely thanks to the courageous Christian resistance to Hitler from the (minority) Protestant Confessing Church around Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller (Meier 1984; Cremer 2019), as well as to Catholic clergy’s abiding reservations and resistance towards the regime.⁴ Moreover, the revelation of the Holocaust as well as of Hitler’s plan for an atheist “final solution of the Church question” (Strohm 2011, p. 7) had also changed attitudes within the churches and contributed to a post-war surge of “Christian Democracy”; a movement, which, though originally “coined in opposition to liberal democracy” (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen 2010, p. 185), now applied itself to the challenge of “how to reconcile Christianity and democracy” (Müller 2013, p. 245). As a result, when in 1945 the allies and millions of disillusioned Germans searched for a narrative and connection point to “another Germany”, Christianity emerged as a positive counterpart to the Nazi era, while still being rooted in German history and civilisation (Ueberschär 2006; Ringshausen 2014).

This appreciation of Christianity was formalised in Germany’s 1949 constitution: the *Grundgesetz* (basic law). “Conscious of their responsibility before God and man” (*Grundgesetz* 1949, p. 1), the authors of the *Grundgesetz* echoed a Christian scepticism for secular ideology and direct democracy by establishing powerful courts and immutable foundational rights (Pestalozza 1981; Müller 2013; Dipper 2019). In the hope that powerful and vibrant churches could also help the new Republic to address the dilemma that, in the view of *Grundgesetz*’ authors, “the liberal, secularised state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself” (Böckenförde 1991, p. 112), they also created an explicitly church-friendly system of “benevolent neutrality” (Waldhoff 2013; Dipper 2019). In this system, the new German state not only guaranteed religious freedom and equal rights for different religious groups, but also endowed religious institutions with a quasi-public status, collected their membership contributions through taxes, partly funded faith-run hospitals, schools and welfare organizations, and enshrined religious education in schools and universities (ibid). In doing so, the *Grundgesetz* formalised the expectation that churches, as protagonists of civil religion, would frame debates, instil social cohesion, foster shared values, virtues and identity as well as to procure “interior forces of regulation” that would allow the liberal state to refrain from coercive or authoritative measures (Böckenförde 1991, p. 113).

This formalised arrangement between church and state in Germany has proven to be a relatively happy alliance over the decades. The churches have enjoyed their constitutional privileges, their high social status as well as the close relations between Germany’s leading clergy and the political elites (Pollack and Rosta 2017; Dreier 2019). Meanwhile, the state has relied on the churches to lend legitimacy to the Federal Republic by bridging public divides, fulfilling social tasks as well as by providing a voice of prophetic criticism throughout its history (Püttmann 1994). Yet, this arrangement has also shaped the outlook, structure and behaviour of Germany’s churches themselves. For one, faith communities’ legal status as bodies of the public law, and the collection of their membership contributions through the state in form of taxes, required them to have a formal organisation with official legal and political representatives, clear hierarchies and official registers of their members (Czermak 2019). Moreover, this system implicitly endows the German state with the authority to distinguish between denominations that qualify as “religious communities” under public law and are therefore deemed worthy of receiving public

⁴ Which came at the cost that more than half of all Catholic priests in Germany had, in one way or the other, fallen victim to coercive measures of the regime by 1945 (Hehl and v. Kösters 1984, p. 79).

support and privileges, and those that are not (ibid). This formalistic approach naturally incentivises well-established, highly institutionalised and hierarchical churches, whose teaching closely aligns with the liberal-democratic basic order, set out by the *Grundgesetz*, over newer, less hierarchical and more state-critical denominations. By consequent, even in times of secularisation, it appears to have reinforced the institutional Protestant and Catholic churches' status and (self-)perception as the "Godparents" of Germany's liberal democratic system—so much to earn them infamous titles such as "system churches" or "government spokesmen" from the populist right (Thieme and Liedhegener 2015; Kuzmany 2016; Thielmann 2017; Elcott et al. 2021).

2.2. The US Constitution's First Amendment: Between Civil Religion and America's Unregulated Religious Marketplace

In the United States, such a quasi-official legal status and formal political co-optation of specific denominations would be unimaginable. Governed by the provisions of the First Amendment that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof", Church–State relations in the US constitution, were conceived by the founding fathers as an explicit rejection of the established church-models of the old world (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014). This was partly a result of enlightenment ideology as well as of the colonies' own origin as a sanctuary for religious minorities like Puritans, Quakers, Anabaptists or Mennonites who had fled persecution from established churches in their home countries (P. Gorski 2019). However, it was also an expression of the founding fathers' pragmatic unwillingness to choose an official church on the federal level in a country that, in 1787, was already religiously highly diverse (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014). As a result, unlike the authors of the *Grundgesetz*, the founding fathers chose not to officially privilege any specific faith tradition but to establish what Thomas Jefferson in one of his letters called "a wall of separation" between church and state in the US constitution (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014).

However, this did not mean that civil religion was to be any less central and prominent in the US political system than in Germany's. On the contrary, from prominent references to God in the pledge of allegiance, on the US dollar or in presidential speeches, through Christian symbolism in congressional invocation prayers and during presidential inaugurations, to powerful institutions such as the annual National Prayer Breakfast, American civil religion has been a ubiquitous feature of American political life (Putnam and Campbell 2012; P. Gorski 2019). This pervasiveness can largely be explained by the fact, that unlike, for instance, French *laïcité*,⁵ the First Amendment was never designed as a wholehearted endorsement of secularism, let alone as an endeavour to ban religion from the public sphere. On the contrary, driven by the concept of a "new covenant" between God and America, the founding fathers' vision of the new Republic was not only that of a political "New Rome" but also of a religious "New Jerusalem" (McDougall 1997; P. Gorski 2019). Religion in general, and Christianity, in particular, were always seen as positive forces and indispensable pillars of the new Republic and its "manifest destiny" (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; P. Gorski 2019; Skillen 2020). However, unlike their German counterparts, the founding fathers were convinced that "true" religion could best prosper if it was freed from the stifling influence of the state and could operate in a comparatively unregulated religious marketplace (Cousins 1958; Finke 1990; Wills 1990; P. Gorski 2019).

By allowing new innovative religious entrepreneurs to challenge traditional churches and to transform the religious landscape, this model laid the fundamentals for what Hatch called the "democratization of American religion" (Hatch 1989). Proponents of religious economy theory have argued that, as a result of this settlement, religious life in America was much more diverse, flexible and able to adapt to changing circumstances than the hierarchical and often state-controlled religious landscape of the old world (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). For instance, while in Europe industrialisation, urbanisation and

⁵ Which in its legal basis is, in fact, not too dissimilar from the American Wall of separation (Portier 2016).

modernisation seemed to undermine the traditional power of the church and fuelled secularisation across societies in the 19th and 20th century, in the US these developments were often accompanied by religious revivals, in which new religious movements emerged and prospered (Wills 1990; Putnam and Campbell 2012; McLoughlin 2013; Finke 1990). These “great awakenings” led, over time, to an ever more diverse and de-centralised marketplace of hundreds of different denominations and thousands of non-denominational churches (ibid).

To be sure, this constitutionally encouraged religious pluralism did not prevent religious strife and discrimination. Religious minorities, whether they be Jewish, Catholic, Mormon or Muslim, repeatedly experienced that just as early American democracy provided unparalleled levels of political participation to white males, while excluding black slaves, native Americans and women; so did the early Protestant vision of American civil religion allow for religious tolerance primarily for Anglo-Saxon Protestants, but not necessarily for others (Casanova 2012; P. Gorski 2019). As a result, both Catholic and Jewish faith communities even began, for instance, to adopt “more Protestant” modes of worship and internal organisation in order to be accepted into American society (Herberg 1983). Still, the lack of institutionalised privileges for specific traditions created a more flexible and malleable civil religious tradition, which especially after WWII, made it much easier to include non-Protestant faiths (Putnam 2016). For instance, in order to rally Americans in a common crusade against “godless communism”, President Eisenhower, sought to bolster civil religion by supporting the foundation of the National Prayer Breakfast in 1953, by adding the words “under God” to the pledge of allegiance in 1954, and by inscribing “in God We Trust” on the Dollar in 1956. However, he also sought to make civil religion explicitly non-sectarian. As Eisenhower put it himself: “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is”. Although this did not mean that post-WWII American religion was without religious substance,⁶ this statement demonstrated the extent to which the American model of Church–State relations incentivised flexibility over formality, diversity over authority, and market-forces over constitutional privileges.

The overall result has been that whereas German benevolent neutrality encouraged the rise of few highly centralised, hierarchical and comparatively homogenous faith communities with strong institutions and deference to easily identifiable leaders who were given financial, legal and political privileges within the public sphere, the First Amendment has led to an opposite outcome. In the US, we see instead the competition between a multitude of de-centralised, comparatively non-hierarchical, highly heterogenous and even internally only loosely connected churches and denominations, that tend to have weak structures and in which clergy and faith leaders’ security and authority are much more dependent on the strength and mood of their congregation than on constitutional privileges or their position in denominational hierarchies (Hatch 1989; Chaves 2011).⁷ These differences in institutional structure have had an important impact on Christian communities’ reactions to the populist right in both countries.

3. How Church–State Relations Affect Elite Responses to Right-Wing Populism

The impact of Church–State relations on German and American Christian communities’ responses to the populist right is perhaps most directly observable in the way they have influenced faith leaders’ attitudes and behaviours. The interviews with faith leaders conducted for this research show that while both German and American faith leaders seemed initially sceptical vis-à-vis the rise of the populist right, they soon began to diverge in their responses. Thus, in Germany the churches quickly emerged as one of the AfD’s most prolific public critics, as they clearly positioned themselves in the pro-immigration camp,

⁶ Indeed, it still re-enforced the “deep-rooted belief in American culture that political and personal virtue should be inseparable” (Sennett 1987, p. 42) and ensured that the new “American creed” still clearly embraced “Judeo-Christian values” (Herberg 1983, p. 258).

⁷ Due to the above mentioned “protestantization” of non-Protestant faith traditions in the US, this is even true for traditionally much more hierarchical traditions such as Catholicism (ibid).

shouldering most refugee aid in Germany through Christian organisations (Nagel and El-Menouar 2018; Nagel 2019), and publicly arguing—often with explicit slights directed at the AfD’s reference to Christian identity—that “our Christian identity is particularly evident when every person who seeks refuge in our country receives humane treatment” (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2016). German faith leaders also directly attacked the AfD’s references to religion as “perverted” (Die Welt 2015), condemned AfD rhetoric as “hate speech” (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2016) and declared the positions of the AfD leadership to “stand in profound contradiction to the Christian faith” (Bishop Bedford-Strohm quoted (Evangelisch.de 2018)).⁸ The interviews conducted for this research confirmed that this opposition towards the populist right was largely uncontested among clergy. Protestant church authorities, for instance, reported receiving “a lot of feedback from parish pastors who were grateful that the church is so clearly taking a stance (against the AfD) in the public sphere” (P1) while Catholic leaders confirmed that in their condemnation of the AfD they were “in complete agreement with church members, the representatives of the Catholic associations and organisations as well as the dioceses and the bishops” (P27).

By contrast, just as German faith leaders’ opposition towards the AfD hardened, their American counterparts’ critique of Trumpism became increasingly muted and isolated. Initially, even many conservative white Evangelical leaders had followed Mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders in condemning Trump’s politics and rhetoric. Prominent figures like the president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) Russell Moore publicly called Trump “an awful candidate” and Christians’ support for him a “scandal and a disgrace”, Evangelicals’ flagship magazine *Christianity Today* ran editorials cautioning Christians against voting Trump, and scores of Evangelical leaders signed petitions and open letters to oppose him (Moore 2015; Crouch 2016; Alexander 2016).⁹ Evangelical interviewees reported that they did “not remember any main Evangelical leader being strong Donald Trump supporters early in the primary season” (P7), while surveys among leading Evangelical clergy showed that the overwhelming majority of participants favoured candidates like Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz or John Kasich (NAE 2015). This shared initial scepticism among German and American faith leaders is perhaps not too surprising, given that right-wing populism’s early core base was to be found in the (in both country’s increasingly secular) white working-class (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Wilcox et al. 2012; Dilling 2018; Carney 2019), and that right-wing populist leaders’ intellectual grounding was located in post-Christian, and at times even neo-pagan, identitarian thinking (Sedgwick 2019; Cremer 2021c; Elcott et al. 2021).

However, by the end of the 2016 election American faith leaders’ open revolt had largely faltered and voices like Moore’s or *Christianity Today*’s became increasingly isolated. Instead, Donald Trump was able to assemble a group of conservative faith leaders in his “White House Faith Advisory Board” to publicly support him (Fea 2018; P. Gorski 2019). As one conservative Evangelical interviewee described this development:

“What happened is that you gradually got a group of fairly prominent voices and figures—who are often played up by the media—such as Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., Eric Metaxas, Ralph Reed, James Dobson, Tony Perkins, Mike Huckabee, Robert Jeffress, who spoke up constantly in support of Trump, as people of a Christian faith. Meanwhile, the counter-voices went quiet. Who is still there criticizing today? I can’t think of many people.” (P29)

The research conducted for this paper suggests that this development was not primarily caused by a shift in American faith leaders’ attitudes towards Trumpism. Certainly, Donald Trump had explicitly catered to white Evangelical concerns through the selection

⁸ In a further step, the churches repeatedly banned AfD politicians from speaking at the Protestant or Catholic Church annual assemblies, where the two great churches’ organise mass gatherings to discuss social issues with politicians of all backgrounds (F.A.Z. 2018; Focus 2016).

⁹ This initial skepticism within the Evangelical elite was mirrored in the fact that in the GOP early primaries Donald Trump performed best among those primary voters who never attend church (ca. 60% of whom supported him) whereas he significantly underperformed among frequent churchgoers (of whom only about 30% voted for him) (Carney 2019).

of stalwart Evangelical Mike Pence as his running mate, as well as his promises to install pro-life supreme justices, relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem and undo the Johnson amendment (Alberta 2019, p. 326). However, in 2020, almost all US faith leaders interviewed still stressed substantial reservations vis-à-vis Trumpism in their midst. A senior Catholic leader, for instance, emphasised that “many of the Bishops are more critical of Trump (. . .) and I think members of the active religious communities, like the Jesuits, the Mercy Sisters etc. are perhaps the most critical of the President” (P2). Similarly, an Evangelical insider confirmed that privately “all these leaders of what I would call establishment and mainstream Evangelical organisations are still very much anti-Trump” (P3). Even members of Trump’s own Faith Advisory board privately admitted their scepticism, emphasising, for instance, that “there were 16 candidates. Donald Trump was my 17th choice” (P12). Rather, most US faith leaders stressed structural or strategic reasons—often directly linked to America’s constitutional arrangement of Church–State relations—as core drivers of their own or their colleagues’ silence or tacit support for Trump. Three key factors emerged as particularly important in this context: faith leaders’ self-perceptions as beneficiaries or losers of the current Church–State system (Section 3.1), the ways in which they could access policymaking in this system (Section 3.2), and leaders’ level of dependence on congregations’ and donors’ approval (Section 3.3).

3.1. Faith Leaders Self-Perception in the System

The first key dynamic observed in this context was that even though both German and US faith leaders largely disagreed with right-wing populists’ nativist and anti-immigrationist policies, American faith leaders saw Trumpism as a potential ally against what they perceived as an increasingly anti-religious re-interpretation of the First Amendment by the mainstream political establishment in recent years, whereas German faith leaders saw themselves as beneficiaries and defenders of the status quo against the populist revolt.

In the US, scholars have observed that with increasing levels of secularisation, and partly in response to the politicisation of religion through the Christian right since the 1980s, there has been an increasingly separatist re-interpretation of the First Amendment, in particular by parts of the Democratic party in recent years (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Campbell et al. 2018). In fact, interviewed faith leaders of all denominations and political orientations lamented that “over the past several decades, the First Amendment has been applied more and more in a way that is antagonistic toward religion per se” (P28), that it “is being terribly misunderstood, abused and being used by forces, who define separation as exclusion” (P14) or even that the current “interpretation of the First Amendment is similar to the freedom of religion that they had in the constitution of the Soviet Union” (P16). While some interviewees also stressed that in this context “the persecution complex is dramatically overdone—sometimes you listen to Christians today and you think they’re describing life under Nero” (P28), interviewees broadly agreed that many Christians “fear that the secular world is closing in on them” (P19) and that there was a “growing scare, and a sense of fear (which) can cause us to defensively turn inward” (P10).

It was against this backdrop that in 2016, once Trump had become the Republican nominee, many faith leaders appeared willing to enter a transactional bargain with his movement and to mute their criticism, if, in return, President Trump was to protect them against secularist re-interpretations of the First Amendment.¹⁰ As one interviewee reported, “Christian support for Trump was less about the core issues of the Trump movement and mostly about their sense of being under siege and that the stakes are higher than ever especially on issues relating to religious liberty” (P13). Others added that “a large part of the explanation is that white Evangelicals came to believe that Trump would bring a gun to a cultural knife fight” (P29) or that “what we’ve needed against Hillary Clinton was a warrior” (P23).

¹⁰ Trump’s public criticism of the Johnson Amendment appears designed to cater precisely to such concerns about religious freedom and secular re-interpretations of the First Amendment (Aprill 2018; Alberta 2019).

Such worries about the First Amendment's secularist re-interpretation and the subsequent consideration of an alliance with right-wing populism in the US, strongly contrast the sentiments expressed by German faith leaders about the *Grundgesetz* and the system of benevolent neutrality. In fact, all of the religious leaders interviewed in Germany had an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the model. One Protestant leader, for instance, praised it as "a wonderful system, the best one I know, because it obliges the state to be neutral and to treat everyone the same, but it also obliges it to support religious community" (P25). A senior Catholic representative credited it with having significantly "contributed to the religious peace in our country" adding that thanks to it, "we in Germany do not have a strong anti-clericalism or anti-Christian attitudes as is the case in other countries" (P31). Even representatives of the more state-critical free-churches judged that "all in all, I think that the German way is very good because we manage to rule out both extremes (state church and strong secularism)" (P20).

As a result, rather than seeing the populist right as a potential ally against a secularist system, many German faith leaders perceived the AfD's anti-system stance as the more important threat to the religion-friendly reading of the *Grundgesetz*. As one senior Catholic put it, "the AfD's position on Church-State relations is extremely problematic. The programme and the statements of AfD politicians strongly suggest that they are striving for a very secularist order and that they do not represent a positive interpretation of religious freedom as we currently have in Germany" (P17). A senior Protestant cleric concurred claiming that "just as it became clear in the 1930s that the National Socialists were hostile to Christianity at the moment when the Christians did not follow their ideology, we already have tendencies that the AfD is becoming increasingly hostile to the church" (P1). Such impressions were underlined by academic analyses such as that of Marietta Heimbach Steins from the University of Münster, who found that the AfD's manifesto was one of the most critical of benevolent neutrality in Germany's party system, because it already sought to restrict Muslims' freedom to exercise their religion and may "demand the same restrictions for other religious communities, including the Christian churches, tomorrow" (Heimbach-Steins and Filipović 2017, p. 31).¹¹

As a result, whereas the formal separation of the Church and State through the First Amendment seemed to make American faith leaders open to narratives of siege and victimhood that went hand in hand with right-wing populists' critiques of the "system" and the political "elite", Germany's churches' privileged position in the *Grundgesetz* and their formal integration into the political decision-making process appeared to incentivise senior clergy to closely align themselves with the mainstream political establishment and to perceive the populist right as a critical threat rather than a potential ally.

3.2. Access to the Policymaking Process

Another critical way in which Church-State relations in Germany may have contributed to a more openly negative Christian response to the populist right is by making access to policy-making less dependent on personal favours and relationships than in America's formally separationist model. Thus, in Germany, the *Grundgesetz* not only grants churches symbolic, legal and financial privileges but also formalises their consultation in important policy-making processes, regardless of which party is currently in power (Püttmann 1994; Dipper 2019). As a result, during our interviews, the official representatives of the Mainline Protestant, Evangelical and Catholic churches towards the German federal parliament and government, were unanimous in their positive assessment that "even if their view is not always followed, the churches and other religious communities are still heard by all parties" (P4) and that "the churches always have the opportunity to set their own substantive accents and voice their views" (P6). Interviewees agreed that this

¹¹ In fact, the AfD already demanded to "abolish the remuneration of church-representatives such as Bishops etc. through tax money" (AfD 2017, p. 45), to end the collection of church taxes through the State, to cut church privileges in education, to sever the personal ties between church and state, and to shut down church officials' voices in politics (AfD 2018).

official and formalised access made Germany's churches significantly less dependent on personal access to specific individuals and more willing to criticise politicians publicly.

By contrast, American faith leaders often explained that especially after Trump was elected president, effectively the only way to influence policy was by informally gaining personal favour within the White House. One Evangelical leader, for instance, stressed that "there are people who went on Trump's Faith Advisory Board and stopped publicly criticizing, because they want a seat at the table to try to influence the president for instance on immigration policy, to help him become a little more liberal about it" (P3). Interviewed members of the White House Faith Advisory Board themselves confirmed that for them "advising the president is really about being able to contribute in such a way that lives would be changed" (P15). However, they also noted that this approach came at the price of muting criticism in public. As one member of the White House Faith Advisory Board put it:

"You got to praise and encourage publicly (...) all of us have been able to express a question or press concern or a warning, but you can only do this if you are in the room. (...) You want to be in the room (...) If you're not in the room, you don't have any influence". (P12)

Certainly, many external observers still cast significant doubts on faith leaders' actual influence in the White House. One senior Republican official, for instance, remarked that "the last time I thought about the Faith Advisory Board was the day it was announced (...) I've literally never heard anyone at the White House raise it in discussions or conversations" (P21). Others expressed concerns that "the Evangelical Advisory Board has been more changed by Trump than it has changed him" (P3). Yet, it is also important to recognise that in America's system of formal separation, religious leaders who had publicly criticised President Trump or whose denominations had done so, and who consequently lost personal favour with the administrations, were left with few alternative ways of influencing the policymaking process as there were no formalised avenues of access. One Mainline Protestant leader, for instance, reported that whereas "under Presidents Obama, Bush and Clinton they frequently invited a cross-section of American faith groups to come to the White House for everything from celebrations to consultations, for conversations, for meals, for briefings, under the Trump administration we have no access" (P26). Similarly, a Catholic leader stressed that there was "not a lot of direct contact between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Trump administration. It's certainly less than in the past". And even Evangelical leaders reported that while the Bush White House was "friendly to Evangelicals" and while "we even had much more engagement under the Obama administration (...). We don't get that at all from this (Trump's) administration" (P18). Lacking formal access channels for faith leaders to the policymaking process, the US model of Church-State relations enabled Trump to make political access much more dependent on personal loyalty than was the case in Germany.

As a result, whereas German faith leaders could rely on their institutions' formalised access to the policymaking process, America's informal relationship between religion and politics meant that public opposition to the populist right would come at significantly higher costs in terms of policy influence and access for US faith leaders, thus incentivising silence or even support for the Trump.

3.3. Church Internal Power Dynamics

However, the interviews suggested that weighing even more prominently on the minds of faith leaders than concerns about the backlash or lack of access open criticism may cause with the Trump administration, were concerns about possible repercussions within faith leaders' own organisations. Thus, the third mechanism through which Church-State relations appear to have contributed to divergent responses of German and American religious communities to right-wing populism is by incentivising different power-dynamics within Christian communities between leaders, congregants and donors in each country. Germany's formalised system of benevolent neutrality, which collects faith communities'

member dues through the tax system and requires faith communities to have clear formal hierarchies and representatives towards the state, seems to encourage a more deferential top-down relationship between church leaders and congregants. It endows leaders *ex officio* with high levels of political, theological and financial authority and independence (Pollack and Rosta 2017), and while it may make Germany's churches less agile and responsive to grassroots trends, it also means that these faith leaders can make decisions and even unpopular public statements with comparatively little need to fear immediate negative repercussions for their own position (Finke 1990; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). By contrast, America's unregulated marketplace of religion, in which church leaders' prominence, authority and even remuneration are largely a function of their ability to attract members and donors, produce much more of a bottom-up power dynamics (Hatch 1989; Dickerson 2013; Smidt 2016). This may help innovative and entrepreneurial new churches to thrive. However, it also means that faith leaders' status, independence, authority, and livelihood are often built on much shakier grounds, making faith leaders more cautious about making potentially controversial public statements.

The interviews confirmed that these structural differences had a particularly important impact on German and American faith leaders' willingness to speak out against the AfD or Trumpism. In Germany, for instance, none of the interviewed faith leaders who had publicly criticised the AfD reported concerns about potential repercussions for themselves. This is not to say that these leaders were unconcerned about how their statements may be perceived in the pews. Some interviewees, for instance, expressed worries that the outspoken course of the churches may make AfD-sympathetic church members feel "marginalised and contributed to their radicalisation, which allowed them and the AfD to present themselves as victims" (P20). Others worried that "we were perhaps too exclusionary and ostracising" (P25). However, such concerns seemed largely motivated by strategic considerations about how their organisation could best "approach AfD voters and convince them of the truth of our own message" (P6), or how the church could "reach out in the public debate to people who feel attracted by the AfD (. . .) so that they do not see right-wing populist events as the only space in which they can express their concerns" (P1). By contrast, interviewees were unconcerned about their own position. The decision to oppose the populist right in principle remained largely seen as a prerogative of the Church leadership and determined by theological and philosophical disagreements with the AfD's politics (Elcott et al. 2021).

By contrast, American faith leaders stressed that concerns about negative reactions from donors or congregants and their repercussions for faith leaders' own position, often trumped theological or political concerns when considering whether or not to speak out about Trumpism. One interviewee, for instance, reported that "many leaders of Christian colleges, who are privately critical of Trump, are not weighing in because of their donors, who hate the people who hate Trump" (P29). Another prominent Evangelical leader emphasised that: "it's very difficult for Evangelical clergy to speak up, particularly if you are compensated within these systems, if your livelihood depends on it. So, self-preservation is why these (anti-Trump) voices have quieted" (P9).

Several indicators suggest that such concerns are not unfounded. There have, for instance, been prominent attempts to oust ERLC president Russell Moore from his position, based on allegations that his willingness to publicly condemn Trump may cost the Southern Baptist Convention donations from Trump supporters (Blair 2018; Smietana 2021). Interviewees emphasised that such developments on the national scale mirrored those on the local level. One Evangelical leader, for instance, reported that "many religious leaders in conservative churches, who opposed Trump were very quickly marginalised to the point that, if they were pastors, many of them lost their churches, or if they kept their churches, they lost large portions of their congregation" making "most conservative clergy who are opposed to Trump so fearful of taking a stance against Trump that we don't know who they are" (P24). In fact, surveys show that half of American pastors felt limited in their ability to speak out on moral and social issues, that only one in five (21%) felt comfortable speaking

out about specific political actors, and that this hesitancy has significantly increased since the rise of Trumpism (Barna 2019).

These findings from the German and American case studies underline the importance of structural factors in incentivising some faith leaders to speak out, but others to remain silent even if they are privately opposed to right-wing populist rhetoric and policies. More specifically, Germany's system of benevolent neutrality, which formally integrates churches into the policymaking process and favours clear hierarchies and centralised structured, appears to provide faith leaders with greater incentives to defend the current system against populist attacks, as well as with the institutional basis to do so without the need to fear major political, social or financial repercussions. By contrast, in America's unregulated marketplace of religion, faith leaders not only think that they have less to gain from protecting a status quo, which they perceive as increasingly secularist and threatening. But open condemnation of the populist right is also seen to be associated with significant costs in terms of access to the policymaking process and faith leaders' own institutional, social and financial position. As a result, the German system of Church–State relations appears to encourage church leaders to speak out more freely against the populist right, while the US separation of church and state seems to encourage many faith leaders to remain silent or even to support Trump.

4. Direct and Indirect Influences of Church–State Relations on Christian Voting Behaviour

Church–State relations' impact on faith leaders' behaviour can have important knock-on effects on their communities' responses to right-wing populism more broadly. There is a growing scholarly literature on the importance of elite actors in creating social taboos, which shape political behaviour in general, and voters' reaction to right-wing populist movements in particular (de Jonge 2019; Douglas 2003; Haidt 2012; Kaufmann 2018). The logic here is that by speaking out unequivocally and publicly against right-wing populism, elite actors can raise the social cost of association with the populist right, thus discouraging voters from electorally supporting these parties even if they agree with some of their policies. For instance, scholars have shown that elite actors in mainstream parties or the media were central in creating and maintaining social taboos around right-wing populism through a cordon sanitaire of non-cooperation or non-reporting (de Jonge 2019; Heinze 2018). Church leaders often play a similar role within congregations, where social taboos can, moreover, be particularly powerful, because of religious institutions' traditional role in defining social norms and because research suggests that religious individuals tend to be more susceptible to social taboos than many of their secular neighbours (Haidt 2012).

Indeed, there is some evidence that in Germany, Christian voters' comparative "religious immunity" to right-wing populist appeals is importantly shaped by Church leaders' willingness and ability to create a social taboo around the AfD (Cremer 2018; Siegers and Jedinger 2020). As Andreas Püttmann, a prolific Catholic commentator put it: "the (German) churches have managed to maintain a moral high-ground, which has largely crumbled in the secular context, where everything seems relative" (Interview Püttmann 2018). As a result, "sermons from the pulpit or public statements (from church leaders) play an important role in maintaining a social taboo against the far-right" (ibid). This could also help account for the AfD's comparatively strong performance in East Germany, where after 52 years of atheist Nazi and Communist dictatorships levels of secularisation are among the highest in the world, religious institutions are significantly weakened and the sway of religious leaders much more diminished than in West Germany (Siegers and Jedinger 2020). While there is growing empirical evidence to support this claim in Germany (Cremer 2021a; Elcott et al. 2021), there is also some research, showing US faith leaders' potential influence on congregants' political attitudes and behaviour. Studies show, for instance, that church attendance can have moderating effects on congregants' views on race relations, immigration and even on domestic violence, which can partly be traced back to faith leaders' influence (Ellison et al. 2007; Wilcox et al. 2012; Ekins 2017; 2018; Carney 2019). These dynamics may also have contributed to Trump's initial underperformance

among frequent churchgoers in the 2015/2016 GOP primaries (Carney 2019). Yet, if a social taboo existed in 2015/2016 in the US, Trump's record performance among white Christians in 2016 and 2020 suggests that it has since eroded (Smith and Martinez 2016; Newport 2020). This is likely partly the result of American church leaders' comparative lack of *willingness to speak out* against the populist right for the structural reasons discussed above. However, in addition to this indirect impact of Church–State relations on Christian communities' responses by means of shaping *elite-actors willingness* to speak out, the structure of Church–State relations may further amplify such dynamics directly, by either boosting or undermining deference to faith leaders, thus also shaping their *ability to be heard*.

For instance, Germany's centralised and formalised system of benevolent neutrality is likely to boost church leaders' ability to influence voters within their churches and beyond, by clearly identifying church leaders, raising their social status and authority, and providing them with a prominent platform in the German public sphere (Pollack and Rosta 2017). Thus, German interviewees confirmed that even in times of secularisation and religious pluralism thanks to such structures deference to "the moral leadership in the Church is very important. There are no anti-elitist motives in the Church (. . .) In this regard, the episcopal faith of Protestants is no less pronounced than that of Catholics" (P11). Others stressed the "continuing social influence and moral authority of the churches" (P25) or observed that despite broader trends of individualisation and institutional erosion, "it is undeniable that the authority and clear positioning of the leading clergy leads to many people accepting taboos in order to belong to the community" (P22). As a result, in the German public sphere, a small number of institutions like the German Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Council of the German Protestant Church (EKD) can comparatively authoritatively "speak for Christianity" in the eyes of the public.

By contrast, America's unregulated and de-centralized religious landscape, which evolved under the First Amendment, creates no authoritative figures who ex officio could speak with the same authority for Christianity in the US (Wuthnow 1988; Stark 1999; Putnam and Campbell 2012). Instead, US interviewees stressed that even though an overwhelming majority of America's religious "establishment" were critical of Trump, and even though many of them initially spoke out against him, the historical lack of hierarchy between and within American churches meant that their voices were often drowned out. Instead, those, who like the members of the White House Faith Advisory Board may lack institutional or denominational standing, but "are often played up by the media (. . .) and speak up constantly in support of Trump, as people of Christian faith" (P29) often had an outsized influence on perceptions of Christians in the pews. One senior denominational leader stressed, for instance, that "the coterie of Christian leaders who surround President Trump and strikingly defend him, combined with the silence from most Christian leaders at the local and national levels has led some to believe that the churches (. . .) support President Trump. But that's not true" (P26).

This challenge to denominational faith leaders' authority appears to be further exacerbated by the accelerating crisis of denominational hierarchies and institutions in America as secularisation progresses (Olson 2008; Campbell and Putnam 2011; Chaves 2011; Putnam 2016; Bruce 2019; Levin 2020). One Protestant leader hence explained that "one of the explanations for Trump's success" was that especially among Protestants "the big story in American religion is the collapse of the denominational traditions and the decentralisation of religion in America" (P13). Other leaders concurred adding that "with regards to Evangelical faith leaders there really isn't a Billy Graham right now, so it's a little bit more diffused as to who the leaders of faith are" (P5), and that nobody knows "who is the most prominent Mainline Protestant leader these days" (P29). The fact that even interviewed representatives of America's Catholic church emphasised that episcopal and papal authority were more limited in the US context and that, for instance, an "Archbishop has very limited authority over local congregations unless it's a matter of faith or morals" (P8) suggests that such dynamics are not just a result of Protestant theology in the US, but a structural characteristic of America's religious landscape accelerated by trends of

secularisation and de-institutionalisation (Hatch 1989; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Carney 2019; Levin 2020).

Whereas Germany's constitutional arrangement of Church–State relations seems hence to have significantly strengthened faith leaders' authority and ability to create social taboos, the American arrangement appears to have had the opposite effect, thus contributing to the erosion and even reversal of social taboos against right-wing populism among American Christians (Siegers and Jedinger 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings from the German and American case studies allow us to discern several key lessons about the ways in which Church–State relations influence Christian responses to right-wing populism. First, that even though different settlements of Church–State relations may be designed with similar intentions—that is in the German and US cases with the aim to strengthen religion as a pillar of liberal democracy—they often exercise opposing incentives and pressure structures on Christian communities as they confront right-wing populist movements. Second, that the effects of these different and pressure structures are often most directly felt by faith leaders, whose response to right-wing populism in Germany and the US appeared importantly influenced by the institutional settlement of Church–State relations. Specifically, Germany's model of benevolent neutrality, which favours clear hierarchies, centralised structures and formally includes German faith leaders in the policymaking process, seemed to give clergy greater incentives to defend the status quo against populist attacks from the AfD, while also equipping them with the institutional basis and social prestige to do so without needing to fear major repercussions. By contrast, America's formal "Wall of Separation" and unregulated religious marketplace, which is more conducive to flat hierarchies, de-centralised churches and informal access to policymaking, appears not only to have facilitated the rise of siege and victimhood narratives among some Christian leaders, thus making them less likely to publicly defend the status quo. But by making faith leaders more dependent on personal relations for political access, and on donors and congregants for their livelihood, it has also raised the potential risks for faith leaders to condemn Trumpism—especially at times when Donald Trump was in office and secularisation and de-institutionalisation already undermined deference to Christian leadership in the US. Third, this research suggests that by ways of shaping faith leaders' willingness and ability to create social taboos against the populist right Church–State relations can also importantly influence the voting behaviour of Christians in the pews. Thus, Germany's centralised system of benevolent neutrality appears not only to have encouraged the leadership of the Protestant and Catholic churches to be more outspoken against the AfD, but also to have boosted their ability to maintain social taboos against the AfD by enshrining their status as foremost representatives of Christianity in German society. By contrast, America's decentralised, non-hierarchical and pluralistic system, produces less deferential authority structures. Instead, the decentralised structure of denominations, as well as the prominence of non-denominational leaders, appeared to significantly undermine the traditional religious establishments' sway over voters and their ability to create and maintain taboos around Trumpism.

These empirical findings are of some relevance for academic debates about the relationship between religion and right-wing populism in western democracies. For one they help us to better understand variation in Christian responses to right-wing populism across different countries and to reconcile seemingly contradictory interpretations of Christianity as either a fuel or a barrier to right-wing populism in western countries (Siegers and Jedinger 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Elcott et al. 2021). Thus, instead of an inherent ideational nexus between conservative Christianity and right-wing populism, this research suggests that under the surface of varying Christian electoral support for the AfD in Germany and Trumpism in the US, Christian leaders in both countries were overwhelmingly critical of what appears to be a largely post-Christian populist right. However, while these findings lend support to the hypothesis that the new populist right is fundamentally

distinct from the traditional religious right (Marzouki et al. 2016; Roy 2019; Cremer 2021c), this paper raises new questions about the conditions under which faith leaders' scepticism translates into open opposition or even "religious immunity" and when they may enter transactional alliances with the new right. Adding to the growing academic debate on elite actors' responses to the radical right, this research stresses the importance of structural and institutional factors on elite actor behaviour, and their ability to shape grassroots behaviour, especially in times of secularisation and de-institutionalisation (Heinze 2018; de Jonge 2019). More broadly, this paper raises questions about how secularisation, the crisis of institutions, and the erosion of deference to traditional authorities in western societies have contributed to the rise of right-wing populist movements and how legal and constitutional arrangements may either accelerate or slow down this process (Hatch 1989; Finke 1990; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). This is by no way to suggest that Church–State relations alone are deterministic of faith communities' responses to right-wing populism. On the contrary, the cases of Germany and the US show that factors such as levels of secularisation, theological traditions and party systems play an equally important role, and it remains to be tested how the influence of Church–State relations interacts with such factors across different countries. Nonetheless, the findings of this research show that even in times of secularisation and institutional erosion, Church–State relations can have an outsized influence not just on how faith communities engage in the public sphere, but also on how religious symbols and language are used in politics more broadly. At a moment when western countries face the question of whether Christianity remains a source of an integrative, prophetic and pro-democratic civil religion as envisaged by the *Grundgesetz* and the US constitution; or whether its symbols become emblems of a new populist right, as epitomised by their presence at the storming of the US capitol and the German Bundestag, such insights will become even more important.

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Appendix A

Table A1. List of Interviewees.

Code	Position	Date	Place
P1	Senior cleric of the German Protestant Church	13 August 2018	Berlin
P2	Senior cleric of the Catholic Church in the United States	6 November 2019	Detroit, MI
P3	Prominent Evangelical leader in the United States	13 February 2020	Wheaton, IL
P4	Senior official of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany	25 July 2018	Berlin
P5	Former member of the U.S. Congress and former co-host of the National Prayer Breakfast	5 February 2020	Washington, DC
P6	Senior official of the Catholic Church in Germany	29 August 2018	Berlin

Table A1. Cont.

Code	Position	Date	Place
P7	Prominent Evangelical leader in the United States	9 November 2019	Phone Call
P8	Senior official of the Catholic Church in the United States	8 November 2019	Philadelphia, PA
P9	Former official of the National Association of Evangelicals i	27 November 2020	Alexandria, VA
P10	Senior representative of the Southern Baptist Convention	27 February 2020	Washington, DC
P11	Senior official of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany	2 August 2018	Berlin
P12	Member of President Donald Trump's White House Evangelical Faith Advisory Council	26 November 2020	Phone Call
P13	Prominent Mainline Protestant leader in the United States	8 January 2020	Washington, DC
P14	Prominent Pentecostal leader in the United States	16 October 2019	Phone Call
P15	Member of President Donald Trump's White House Evangelical Faith Advisory Council	26 February 2020	Phone Call
P16	Senior cleric of the Catholic Church in the United States	6 November 2019	Chicago, IL
P17	Senior official of the Catholic Church in Germany	26 June 2018	Dresden
P18	Prominent Evangelical leader in the United States	4 February 2020	Washington, DC
P19	Prominent conservative commentator in the United States	7 January 2020	Washington, DC
P20	Representative of the German Evangelical Alliance	28 August 2018	Berlin
P21	Senior GOP official	22 November 2019	Washington, DC
P22	Representative of the Federal Agency for Civic Education	20 August 2018	Berlin
P23	Member of President Donald Trump's White House Evangelical Faith Advisory Council	14 February 2020	Phone Call
P24	Senior Pentecostal cleric in the United States	5 February 2020	Phone Call
P25	Senior representative of the German Protestant Church	7 August 2018	Berlin
P26	Senior representative of the National Council of Churches	7 November 2019	Washington, DC
P27	Senior representative of the Catholic Church in Germany	24 August 2018	Berlin
P29	Prominent conservative commentator in the United States	14 November 2019	Washington, DC
P30	Catholic Public Intellectual in Germany	9 August 2018	Bonn
P31	Senior Cleric of the Catholic Church in Germany	7 September 2018	Munich

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